

JOHN KEEGAN

# HOW HITLER COULD HAVE WON THE WAR

*The Drive for the Middle East, 1941*

Adolf Hitler may be the perfect example of how an individual with a genius for the main chance can—through determination close to madness, and more than a little luck—alter history. You can argue that if Hitler hadn't survived the First World War, someone else in a Germany ravaged by defeat, hyperinflation, and world depression, would inevitably have come forward to start the Second. In this deterministic view, people like Hitler are not causes but symptoms. But who? None of those around him had the same sort of evil charisma. The conditions he fed on may have been largely unavoidable but the Nazi revolution he created and led was not. Nor can a phenomenon so focused on one man and his whims evolve in a predictable pattern. Hitler's mind was a virtual Pandora's box of what ifs. Today we tend to forget how close he came to imposing his *Triumph of the Will* on much of the world: The scenario that John Keegan describes here could very well have happened. Hitler, like Napoleon, seriously contemplated a campaign through the Near East, following the route of another conqueror, Alexander the Great. In actuality, both Hitler and Napoleon came to fortunate grief in Russia. What if, in 1941, Hitler had put off

*his invasion of the Soviet Union for a year and had gone for the prize that might have given him the edge against the beleaguered Allies: Middle Eastern oil?*

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What if, in the summer of 1941, Hitler had chosen to make his major attack not into Soviet Russia but across the Eastern Mediterranean, into Syria and the Lebanon? Would he have avoided the defeat he suffered outside Moscow that winter? Might he have won a strategic position that would have brought him eventual victory?

The inducement was strong. Had he been able to solve the logistical difficulty of transferring an army from Greece to Vichy French Syria, he would then have been well placed to strike at northern Iraq, a major center of oil production, and thence at Iran, with even ampler oil reserves. The establishment of a strong military presence in northern Iran would have positioned his forces close to the Soviet Union's own oil production centers on the Caspian Sea, while a drive into Southern Iran would have given him possession of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's wells and vast refinery at Abadan. From eastern Iran, moreover, the route lay open toward Baluchistan, the westernmost province of British India, and thence to the Punjab and Delhi. The occupation of the Levant—Syria and Lebanon—would, in short, have placed him astride a network of strategic highways leading not only to the main centers of Middle Eastern oil supply but also to entry points giving onto the most important imperial possession of his last remaining European enemy, Britain, and also the southern provinces of his chosen ideological opponent, Stalin's Russia.

By the spring of 1941 Russia had become a strategic obsession to Hitler. After his defeat of France in 1940, he had, for a few weeks, persuaded himself that he could assure Germany's dominance of Europe by negotiating a peace with Britain. With Britain neutralized, he could have consolidated his military position and taken his time in choosing future strategic options. The defeat of the Soviet Union was foremost among

them. In the aftermath of the French armistice in June, however, he did not expect to have to make an immediate call on his military resources. His appreciation of the situation was that Britain would, in a spirit of realism, accept that Nazi Germany enjoyed an unassailable superiority and consequently submit to its military dominance.

Churchill's refusal to admit realities, as seen from Berlin, and to persist in resistance, caused Hitler in July, even while he was committing the Luftwaffe to what would become known as the Battle of Britain, to reposition the ground forces of the Wehrmacht eastward, toward the new frontier of the Soviet Union as defined after its annexation of half of Poland in September 1939. At the same time, he reversed his recently taken decision to demobilize thirty-five of the infantry divisions that had fought in the Battle of France and to double the number of panzer divisions from ten to twenty. He also arranged for his war production office, during August, to select the site for a new führer headquarters in East Prussia, while in September his personal operational staff, OKW, submitted an outline plan, "Fritz" for "an offensive against the Soviet Union."

All these measures were, however, precautionary. He had certainly not yet firmly decided to attack Russia and was, indeed, still ready to negotiate an extension of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 1939 for the further settlement of spheres of interest in Eastern Europe, as long as the terms were satisfactory to him. Molotov would come to Berlin in November to continue discussions. In the meantime, Hitler embarked on a program of diplomatic rather than military measures as a means of consolidating his power over Eastern Europe short of the Soviet border.

His instrument was the Tripartite Pact, signed between Germany, Italy, and Japan on September 27, 1940, binding any two to come to the aid of a third if it was attacked. The pact was not exclusive. Others might join and Hitler, in the autumn of 1940, decided that the uncommitted states of Central and southern Europe should. Hungary and Romania, both strongly anti-Russian and pro-German, and the puppet state of Slovakia signed, before the year was out. Pressure was then put on Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to join also, as they would the following March.

His Russian diplomacy worked less smoothly. Despite the evidence of Nazi Germany's military mastery over most of the continent and the strong suspicion that Stalin's military purges of 1937 to 1938 had gravely damaged the Red Army's fighting power, Stalin insisted upon treating Hitler as an equal throughout the complex second half of 1940. When Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, arrived in Berlin on November 12, he proposed that the Soviet Union be allowed to annex Finland, as it already had the Baltic States, that it should guarantee Bulgaria's frontiers, despite already having taken a large slice of Bulgarian territory, that its rights of exit from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, through the Turkish Bosphorus, should be enlarged, and that it should also be given new maritime rights in the Baltic. Hitler was outraged. When, after his departure, Molotov sent the draft of a treaty outlining Soviet requirements, Hitler ordered Ribbentrop to make no reply. Instead, on December 18, he signed the secret Führer Directive 21, which would become the blueprint for Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia.

Between the inception of Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, and Hitler's rejection of Molotov's November proposals, many disturbing events were to intervene. To Hitler, the most irritating were those initiated by his fellow dictator, Benito Mussolini, in an attempt to establish Italy's claim to be Nazi Germany's equal as an actor on the stage of grand strategy. Mussolini had delayed his entry into the Second World War until the hard tasks in the West—the defeat of France, the expulsion of Britain from the continent—had been achieved. Mussolini had then struck easy victories. In September 1940, he invaded British Egypt from Libya. On October 28 he launched, from recently occupied Albania, an offensive into Greece, Britain's last ally on the European mainland. Both enterprises proved fiascoes. A British counteroffensive in December humiliated Italy's Libyan army, while the Greeks, outnumbered though they were, rapidly moved from defense to attack and, in a winter campaign, captured half of Albania from its Italian occupiers.

Worse was to follow. Having browbeaten the Yugoslav government of Prince Regent Paul to subscribe to the Tripartite Pact on March 25, the

Germans were confronted two days later by a patriotic military coup, which rejected the pact and made common cause with the British and Greeks, who were still united in opposition to the settlement of southern European affairs in Germany's favor. Hitler had, in February, been obliged to send troops to Italian Libya, the nucleus of the soon-to-be-famous Afrika Korps, under Erwin Rommel, to rescue the Italians from a worse defeat. He now decided to interrupt his deployment of forces for the inception of Barbarossa by instructing a subordinate operation, Marita, that would bring Yugoslavia and Greece under his complete control.

Marita was in part provoked by a British initiative. In November 1940, the Greek government, attacked by the Italians a week earlier, had accepted the deployment of R.A.F. squadrons to the Peloponnese. In March 1941, it went further. Even though it risked provoking Hitler, it agreed to welcome four British divisions, detached from the Western Desert Force in Libya, where they had recently taken part in Wavell's spectacular defeat of the Italians. The arrival of the British divisions on March 4 did indeed gall Hitler. It was also the development that encouraged the Yugoslav patriots to repudiate the Tripartite Pact, a bold but disastrous gesture. On April 6, Yugoslavia was invaded simultaneously from five directions, by the Italians from Albania, by the Hungarian army, and by German forces based in Austria, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Yugoslav army collapsed immediately, freeing the Germans and Italians to switch their troops southward into Greece.

The Greeks and their British allies sustained a longer resistance than the hapless Yugoslavs. Their defensive positions were, however, also outflanked from the start, particularly by the strong German army based in Bulgaria under the Tripartite Pact. One line after another was turned until, on April 27, the British survivors of the campaign succeeded in making their escape from southern Greek ports, leaving many prisoners and almost all their heavy equipment behind them.

Marita was another triumph for Hitler. At almost no cost, he had completed his conquest of mainland Europe, leaving only Sweden,

Switzerland, and the Iberian Peninsula outside his control or that of his allies. The Soviet Union alone remained to challenge his power. The plans for its invasion and defeat were written, however, and it only required his word to set the Wehrmacht in motion toward Moscow.

But was the road to Moscow the right direction to take? The destruction of the Soviet Union was the strategic and ideological project closest to Hitler's heart. It may be thought in retrospect, however, that a direct offensive across the Soviet frontier was not the best means of bringing the result about. In the long run, of course, the Wehrmacht would have to fight and defeat the Red Army. Military victory was, nevertheless, only one of the objects of Barbarossa. Another, almost equally as important if he were to sustain his effort and achieve the final defeat of Britain, was to secure the Soviet Union's enormous natural resources—above all its oil output. The Romanian oil wells apart, and they were insufficient to supply his needs, the supplement of oil exported from Russia under the terms of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact being essential, he had no source of oil directly under his control. He needed oil urgently.

Yet ample oil lay close at hand, all the closer since he had completed the conquest of Greece. Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia were the world's largest providers of oil and a direct route toward their fields and refineries lay just across the eastern Mediterranean through Syria. If Turkey's neutrality were to be violated, a land route was available as well. The Levant was weakly defended. The Vichy French army in Syria and Lebanon numbered only 38,000, without modern equipment or air cover. The British army in Palestine, Egypt, and Libya numbered only seven divisions and was already locked in combat with the Afrika Korps, which buttressed a larger Italian army. Militarily, if the German-Italian forces in the Middle East were strengthened, the area was ripe for plucking. There was even the makings of a local pro-German client regime. On April 3, Rasid Ali had overthrown the pro-British government in Iraq and asked for German help. German aircraft arrived at Mosul on May 13, having staged through Syria, the Vichy French garrison feeling powerless

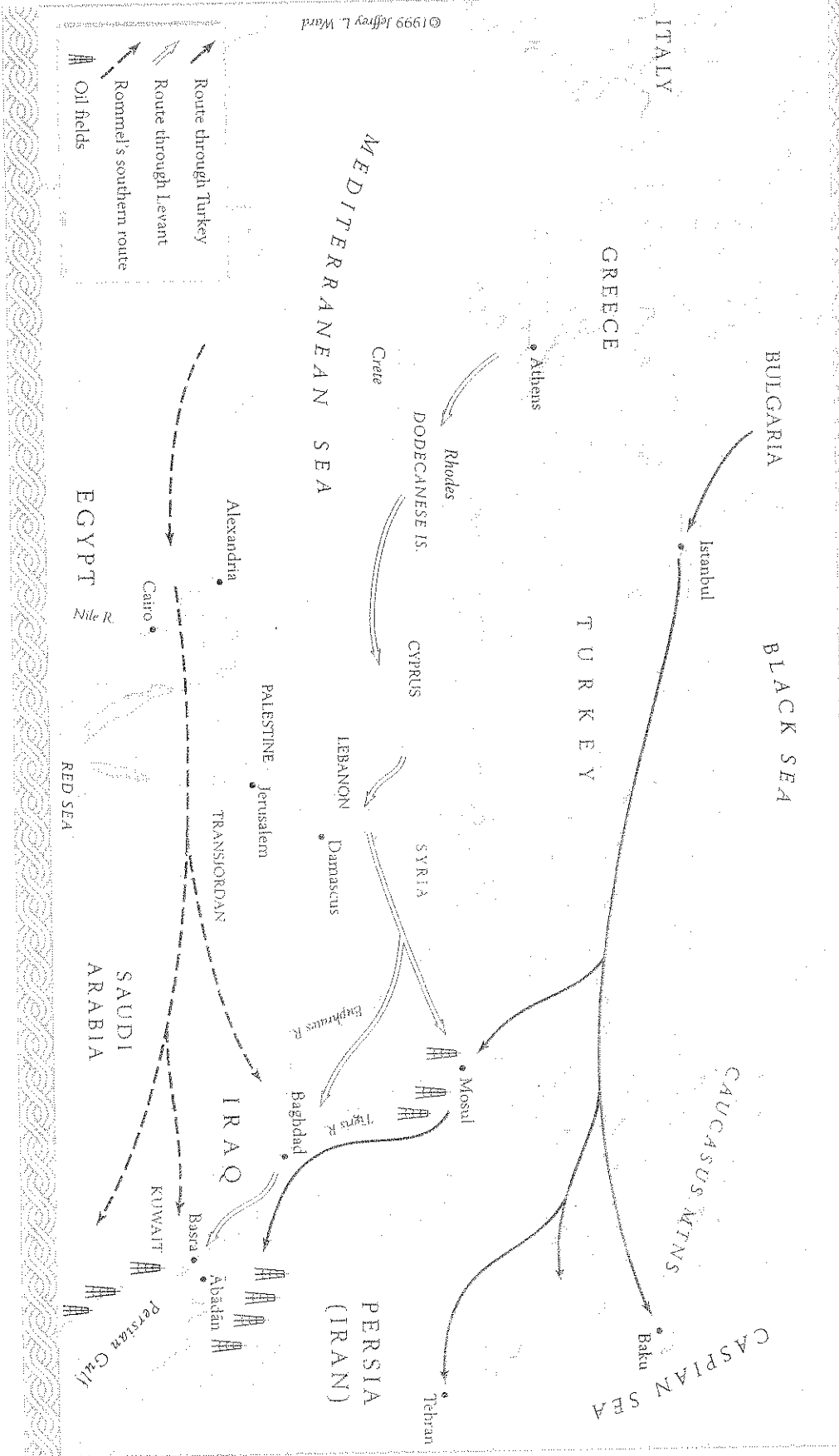
to impede. Though Rasid Ali was swiftly overthrown by a British force operating from Transjordan—and the Vichy garrison of Syria and Lebanon defeated in a bitter three-week war in June and July—Hitler was sufficiently encouraged by the evidence of his enemies' strategic fragility in the Middle East to issue Führer Directive 30, on May 23, outlining a project to support the "Arab Freedom Movement," in conjunction with a German-Italian offensive toward the Suez Canal. On June 11, Führer Directive 32 anticipated, among other operations, the assembly of forces in Bulgaria "sufficient to render Turkey politically amenable or overpower her resistance."

Both Directives were posited, however, on the supposition that Barbarossa would have already been launched. What if, as an alternative, the thrust into the Middle East from Bulgaria and Greece had been chosen as the principal operation for 1941? There might have been two variants.

The first would have avoided the violation of Turkish neutrality and used territory already Axis—the Italian Dodecanese islands off the Turkish coast, other Greek islands, or British Cyprus—as stepping-stones to Vichy Syria. Italian Rhodes, for example, might have been chosen as a staging point for an airborne assault on Cyprus, employing the 7th Airborne Division, in practice uselessly thrown away in the descent on Crete on May 20. Behind an airborne bridgehead in Cyprus and employing local shipping protected by German airpower, a sizable amphibious assault force could have been built up for landings in Syria and Lebanon. Once a secure foothold had been established in the French Levant, mobile columns could have raced across the desert to northern Iraq and a strong lodgment area created from which reinforcements might have begun the conquest of southern Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The oil wealth yielded would have solved all Hitler's difficulties in maintaining his military machine. By the end of 1941, with a force of perhaps only twenty divisions, no more than he pushed toward the Russian Caucasus via the Barbarossa routes in 1942, he would have secured a position from which to threaten Stalin's oil-producing centers on the Caspian Sea, having bypassed the major geographical obstacles defending it. Barbarossa might have been



HITLER'S DESERT STORM, 1941



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launched, in consequence, in 1942 in much more favorable military circumstances.

This scenario depends for its success on the assembly of sufficient shipping in the eastern Mediterranean to transport the force required. That it could have been adequately protected by airpower against British naval attack is demonstrated by the failure of the Royal Navy to sustain the landings in the Dodecanese in the autumn of 1943. What seems more problematic is the availability of maritime transports. Hitler, in Directive 32, wrote of ". . . chartering French and neutral shipping." The reality was that the British had already acquired most available vessels, forcing the Germans during the assault on Crete, for example, to depend on a fleet of wholly inadequate coastal craft to transport its ground forces. The probability is, therefore, that a strategy that depended on using island "stepping-stones" toward the Levant, attractive as it looks, would have foundered for want of shipping capacity.

A strategy that took as its starting point the violation of Turkish neutrality might, on the other hand, have worked very well. Turkey's record of neutrality during the Second World War is stoutly honorable. Wooed by the Germans, the British, and the Russians, it consistently refused to make concessions to any, despite its patent military weakness. The Turks are doughty fighters. They lacked during the Second World War, however, any sort of modern military equipment. Had Hitler decided, therefore, after the conquest of the Balkans, but before Barbarossa, to use Bulgaria and Greek Thrace as a springboard to invade European Turkey, capture Istanbul, cross the Bosphorus, and capture Anatolia, the Turkish mainland, it is difficult to see what could have stopped him. Stalin's forces, certainly, deployed as they were to defend the Soviet Union's new Eastern Europe frontier, were in no position to oppose such an initiative. The Wehrmacht, as it was to demonstrate in the Russian Steppe, was certainly capable of surmounting the difficulties of traversing the Anatolian terrain. A rapid advance to the Caucasus barrier, Russia's frontier with Turkey, would have secured the Wehrmacht's flank with the Soviet Union. From Anatolia, it could easily have irrupted into Iraq and Iran,

thrust its tentacles southward into Arabia, and positioned its vanguards to envelop the Caspian Sea and menace Russian Central Asia.

Had Hitler used the Balkan victories of the spring of 1941 to align his forces for an Anatolian and Levantine victory, leading to wide conquests in Arabia and the securing of decisive positions on Russia's southern flank, it is difficult to see how a variant of Barbarossa, conceived as a pincer movement rather than a blunt frontal assault, would not have succeeded. As a by-blow, Britain's foothold in the Middle East would have been fatally undermined and its dominance of the Indian Empire dangerously threatened.

Fortunately, Hitler worked within a strategic vision limited by legalistic and ideological blindspots. Legally, he could find no quarrel with Turkey's stringently neutralist diplomacy. Ideologically, his fear and hatred of Bolshevism allowed him no freedom to choose an alternative to his desire to smash the Soviet Union by direct, frontal assault. He exulted in the great victories over Stalin in the summer and autumn of 1941 and never expressed regret, even when Russian shells were falling on his Berlin bunker in 1945, that he had set Operation Barbarossa in motion. How grateful we should be that, in the spring of 1941, he should not have chosen a more subtle and indirect strategy.

◆ WILLIAMSON MURRAY ◆

## WHAT A TAXI DRIVER WROUGHT

In 1931, a taxicab driver in New York City, looking for late-night fares, was making his rounds. It was a cold, shadowy night, and as he turned north on Fifth Avenue (which then ran two ways) he discerned a figure waiting for him to pass on the almost-deserted avenue. In a hurry to find one final fare, he ignored his instinct to slow and accelerated. He hit the rather dumpy man who, perhaps looking in the wrong direction, stepped in his way.

In its obituary the next day, the *New York Times* spoke of Churchill's contributions to British politics in the Great War: his getting the fleet ready and his work at the ministry of munitions in 1918, but the obituary writer could not resist the temptation to lay the failure of the Dardanelles expedition in 1915 primarily at Churchill's door. And not surprisingly the *Times* also underlined Churchill's life as one of great political and intellectual promise—promise that he never quite fulfilled.

American historians in a beleaguered democracy at the end of the twentieth century never put the blame for the great Nazi victory in the war of 1939 to 1947 on this by now obscure event: How could one assign the troubles of a nation to a taxi accident? After all, everyone agreed that history is entirely the result of great social movements and the actions of the millions who make up humanity—certainly not the product of the actions of a few great men. But some historians still did argue that Britain's surrender in the summer of 1940 by its prime minister, Lord Halifax, was not a reasoned and sensible recognition of Britain's hopeless strategic position, and that the turning over of the Royal Navy to the Kriegsmarine had not made sense. But they could not imagine how Britain might have acquired

the strategy of leadership to defeat the Nazi conquerors of Europe. And so America's armed forces again prepared to meet the Nazi forces in South America, and the wars for survival never seemed to end.

The taxi injured but did not kill Churchill—a matter of inches and milliseconds saved his life. But that's a story we already know.

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◆ DAVID FROMKIN ◆

## TRIUMPH OF THE DICTATORS

In the spring of 1941, Nazi Germany was poised to dominate the earth. France, the Low Countries, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Greece, and much of Poland had been overrun by the Germans. All of Europe, save neutral Sweden and Switzerland, was in the hands of Hitler's friends and allies: dictators or monarchs who ruled fascist Italy, Vichy France, Franco's Spain, Portugal, the Balkan countries, Finland, and above all the Soviet Union.

A single German division under General Erwin Rommel, sent to rescue beleaguered Italians in Libya, drove Britain's Middle Eastern armies flying and threatened the Suez lifeline; while in Iraq a coup d'état by the pro-German Rashid Ali cut the land road to India. In Asia, Germany's ally, Japan, was coiled to strike, ready to take Southeast Asia and invade India. No need to involve the United States; by seizing the Indies, Japan could break the American embargo and obtain all the oil needed for the Axis Powers to pursue their war aims.

Hitler should have sent the bulk of his armies to serve under Rommel, who would have done what Alexander did and Bonaparte failed to do: He would have taken the Middle East and led his armies to India. There he would have linked up with the Japanese. Europe, Asia, and Africa would have belonged to the coalition of dictators and militarists.

The Nazi-Soviet-Japanese alliance commanded armed forces and resources that utterly dwarfed the military resources that the holdouts, Britain (with its empire) and the United States, could field. The English-speaking countries would have been isolated in a hostile world and would have had no realistic option but to make their peace with the enemy, retaining some autonomy for a time, perhaps,

but doomed ultimately to succumb. Nazi Germany, as leader of the coalition, would have ruled the world.

Only Hitler's astonishing blunder in betraying and invading his Soviet ally kept it from happening.

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